

SAGE Reference

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## Modernism

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Modernism was a movement that emerged in Western art and literature of the late 19th century and the early 20th century. It was an aesthetic response to the rapid changes sweeping across all aspects of life at the turn of the century in the West. The industrialization of the European economy and the urbanization of its population resulted in a significant series of cultural transformations that gave birth to new ideas and radical techniques of expression in creative fields. Historians generally consider the 1890s to be the beginnings and the 1930s as the end of the modernist epoch. In that period, the fast-paced technological and scientific advances energized the society by encouraging people to embrace the new, experiment with their novel ideas, and break away from the past. Modern technology produced new forms of media that were faster and more efficient in conveying information over long distances. Things became old and obsolete very fast because new forms, ideas, and objects emerged very fast. With the expansion of modern media such as photography, film, the telegraph, and the telephone, people who lived in different parts of the world became more closely connected to each other. This revolution in media technology led to what is now known as globalization. Although modernism is considered a 19th- and 20th-century phenomenon, it still continues to be relevant as a philosophical idea and as a question of media technology in an increasingly interconnected world.

### A Form of Expression

Modernism was primarily a rebellion against the static and rigid rules that governed traditional society. In arts and letters, it was a break from realism—the dominant style of creativity in bourgeois society. The modernists created new ways to perceive and represent reality. They abandoned all the established forms, shapes, and colors as practiced in realist and romantic arts. The modernists used the past only to destroy, distort, or parody it. In painting, Pablo Picasso and a group of like-minded artists in Paris led the way to experiments in Cubism, Surrealism, Expressionism, and Dadaism; in literature, Charles Baudelaire and James Joyce, to name only two, were major modernist figures; in architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (known as Le Corbusier) changed the look of our built environment; and many more in different fields contributed to the formation of the modern world as we know it today by unraveling all the rules and doctrines respected by the establishment. The modernist mentality, however, was not limited to arts and letters, it was a paradigm shift in different branches of science and philosophy as well. Among many others, Albert Einstein who revolutionized physics, Sigmund Freud who changed the way we think about human psychology, Friedrich Nietzsche and Edmund Husserl, two German philosophers who posed new questions, are also modernists who deeply influenced their respective fields.

One of the most profound changes that modernism brought to society was in the modes and means of communication. The technological advances of the time gave artists and innovators a incentive to experiment with their ideas. New technologies of recording, storing, and transmitting sound, text, and image created new tools for communication and gave way to urban mass entrainment. Photography, cinema, radio, and telephone became common and commercialized, and as a result, the way people communicated was changed forever. The promise of technology was widely praised and the expectations were so great that in the 1900s a French artist, Jean-Marc Côté, published a series of futuristic postcards envisioning France in the year 2000. In one of the images he predicts flying taxis in Paris, and in another, there is a robot barber. The capacity of technology was considered limitless.

### A Way of Life

Modernism created a new figure, the flâneur, a person who wanders around the city just for the purpose of enjoying the novelties, changes, and speeds of modern urban life, a life best observed by Charles Baudelaire, the Parisian poet who coined the term modernité (modernity). Walter Benjamin, a literary critic who spent his career interpreting the modernist period, put an enormous effort into exploring modern urban life and interpreting modern popular culture. The emergence of mass culture in the modernist period, as a result of modern communication technologies, was primarily an urban phenomenon. Cinema, for instance, was initially invented as a technological wonder, then became a public magic show before it emerged as a respected art form. It soon became the most spectacular medium of mass entertainment in the cities. The modernists, thanks to the communication technology they used, are also credited for bringing high and low culture closer

together. The music and paintings that were guarded behind the doors of opera houses and museums were now commodified and available for public consumption through recordings, radio, photography, and cinema. The Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer called this phenomenon the culture industry.

Modernism changed not only the technological tools of communication but also the very language we use: If, say, in the Victorian era, written communication tools were wordy documents loaded with flowery phrases, with the invention of telegraph, newspaper, postcards, and memos they became more polished, precise, and concise, cutting out all superfluous words. It was the function-oriented, speed-based modern life that demanded, and invented, brevity, clarity, and standardization of punctuation in written language.

Modernism as a philosophical idea, an artistic movement, and as a way of living spread quickly in non-Western countries through the circulation of arts and other cultural products. Part of the debates on modernism involves the experience of this movement in non-Western places and cultures in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The question of how non-European peoples and places experienced modernism has given rise to controversies among both Western and non-Western thinkers. While some consider the emergence of modernism in the periphery as a colonial project to establish Western cultural hegemony worldwide, others do not see it as a Westernization of the East rather as an inevitable cultural dialogue facilitated by the arts and enriching both sides. Over the past century during which globalization of culture, media, and economy has brought countries closer together and made easier the process of intercultural exchange, we have been witnessing the growth of local modernisms. Modern artistic practices in the non-Western world have led to innovative ways of art-making where both Western and local styles, ideas, and techniques are combined as an experiment to create new modes of artistic expression. Thus, intercultural interactions are unavoidable in the digital age—when time and space are no longer barriers to communication.

Modernism is now viewed as the product of a bygone era, but the questions raised at the turn of the 20th century are still relevant today. As long as there is an innovative spirit, there will always be the new and the old, and the conflict between the two. The dialectic of continuity and change is a part of the nature of creativity, both in artistic traditions and in the communications media.

See also [Critical Theory](#); [Culture Industry](#); [Postmodernism](#)

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## Further Readings

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